



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

**02 October 2025**

**Present:** Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)  
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
John Blair MLA  
Tom Buchanan MLA  
Aoife Finnegan MLA  
William Irwin MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Áine Murphy MLA

**Via Zoom:**

**Apologies:** Daniel McCrossan MLA

**In Attendance:** Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk  
Glenda Doherty, Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor  
Sarah Preece, Clerical Officer

***The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:15am***

**1. Apologies**

Daniel McCrossan MLA.

**2. Declaration of Interests**

The Chair reminded Members of their responsibility to declare any interests in any of the items under discussion.

Declan McAleer MLA declared that he is an executor of a small farm in Co Tyrone.

William Irwin MLA declared an interest as a partner in a farm business.

Tom Buchanan MLA declared an interest as a partner in a farm business.

**3. Chairperson's Business**

The Chair thanked Carrickfergus Marina, owned and operated by Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, for hosting the meeting.

The Chair referred to a Draft Media Release regarding the meeting and the visits to Dobbs Farm, a Nature Friendly Farm, and to the Carrick Community Greengrocers, supplied by the Dobbs Farm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to publish the media release.

The Chair referred to an invitation to an event - AI and the Future of Work - at Riddel Hall, Queen's University Belfast, on Wednesday, 22 October, at 4:30pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note and for Members to respond individually.

The Committee considered the Clerk's Memo outlining the scrutiny and consideration of Bovine TB that the Committee has undertaken to date following consideration of a request from Chris Hazzard MP for South Down, at its meeting of 25 September.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the content of the note and agreed to forward it to Chris Hazzard MP.

The Chair referred to correspondence the Committee considered at the previous meeting from Cathy Mason MLA, regarding a meeting at Seaforde, where she heard from farmers on the impact of Bovine TB (bTB) on the South Down farming community and requested the Committee hear evidence from farmers affected.

The Committee noted that there have been 65 written and oral questions on bTB since the Assembly resumed in February 2024.

The Chair proposed in the first instance that the Committee has an informal session and invite two farmers who were present at the meeting at Seaforde and two farmers put forward by the Ulster Farmers Union and then consider next steps.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to have an informal session on a date to be agreed before the end of the year.

The Chair referred to an invitation from Outscape, to an online training webinar entitled “The True Impact of Trails: Measuring Impact with the SROI Toolkit” on Tuesday 21 October, from 12:00 to 1pm via Microsoft Teams.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note and Members would join the webinar if available.

The Chair referred to the Dilapidation Bill and advised that plans are now in place to meet some members of the Youth Assembly (YA) who are interested in giving their thoughts to assist the Committee’s scrutiny.

The online meeting will be led by the YA Secretariat and will take place on Tuesday 14 November at 6.30pm and further details would be provided to the Committee in due course.

**Agreed:** The Committee Members noted the meeting.

#### **4. Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting on 25 September 2025 were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

**Agreed:** The Minutes were agreed.

#### **5. Matters Arising**

The Committee considered the response from the Minister, dated 26 September, to its query regarding the collaboration between DAERA and the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) in relation to the A5 Western Transport Corridor and to vested land and any associated compensation.

The Committee noted the response stated that DAERA remains committed to working collaboratively with DfI, but in relation to vested land and any associated compensation, this remains solely the responsibility of DfI.

Some Members expressed disappointment with the response did not provide any information on all its queries and the Minister failed to respond to queries specifically within the remit of DAERA.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister expressing its disappointment at his response and requesting clarification around the issues raised.

The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 29 September, in reply to its letter advising of the concerns raised by Diana Armstrong MLA and RSPB NI on the future of agri-environmental support under the new Farming with Nature Landscape Package.

The Committee noted the next phase of Farming with Nature Transition Scheme (FwNT) will include a scheme to replace Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) Higher and to include prioritisation of those with EFS Higher Agreements due to expire at the end of this year being considered.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the response to Diana Armstrong MLA and to the RSPB.

The Committee also considered correspondence, dated 30 September, it has been copied into from Declan Kearney MLA to the Minister raising concerns regarding farmers being advised that they are not eligible for the Farming with Nature Transition Scheme due to having an existing EFS plan even though the EFS is due to expire in December.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the response it received from the Department regarding EFS to Declan Kearney MLA for his information.

The Committee considered the RalSe Supplementary Briefing Note on Aquaculture providing a response to questions arising from the RalSe presentation on 11 September, providing an overview of Aquaculture across the UK and Ireland.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek further details regarding Shared Ireland funding, in terms of what it could mean for the growth and further development of aquaculture within Northern Ireland

The Chair referred to a response, dated 29 September, from the Department regarding queries the Committee raised during the briefing on The Agricultural Schemes (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 at the meeting of 18 September.

The response stated that the devolved administrations have all introduced Agriculture Acts and none contain specific provisions for the maximum amount of penalty that may be set but do give discretion for a penalty to be established in secondary legislation. However schemes in operation currently appear to be operating under retained EU law or existing domestic legislation.

The Committee noted the response also stated that a review concluded that no persons have been served with any penalty under the obstruction of authorised persons provision using the primary power in the Agriculture Act (NI) 1949.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

***The Department Officials joined the meeting at 10:31am***

***William Irwin MLA joined the meeting at 10:33am***

## **6. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - SL1 The Farming for Sustainability Innovation Payments Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

***This agenda item was recorded by Hansard***

The following Departmental Officials briefed the Committee:

- Paul McHenry, College Director, CAFRE;
- Alan Galbraith, Head of College Support Service; and
- Nigel Murphy, Head of Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Policy Branch.

The Committee noted the SR will be made under the negative resolution procedure to provide DAERA with the legal powers to implement the Farming for Sustainability Innovation Scheme, to come into operation on 23 October 2025.

The scheme consists of three elements - Innovation Farms, International Innovation Visits and Innovation Partnerships, with the aim to encourage the adoption of innovative practices within the NI farming industry.

The Committee heard that the Department has co-designed the scheme with the APSG and other stakeholders and that it will retain and enhance features in the current scheme, for example, by providing additional help and support.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that a lesson learnt from the current scheme is that the new one will now offer support for the implementation of innovative techniques and practices.

A Member raised concern regarding the level of payment to farmers hosting events and suggested it may be insufficient to cover costs.

Members also enquired how the success of the scheme would be measured and Officials responded that this would be linked to the level of adoption of new innovative techniques by participants of the scheme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Department proceeds to make the SR and will then consider it in due course.

***The Department Officials left the meeting at 11:00am***

***The Department Officials joined the meeting at 11:00am***

## **7. SL1 The Farm Sustainability Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

***This agenda item was recorded by Hansard***

The following Departmental Officials briefed the Committee:

- Anna Campbell, Director, Agricultural and Environmental Schemes Division;
- Gregor Kerr, Programme Director, Future Implementation Unit (FIU);
- Aidan McEvoy, Head of Controls and Assurance Development Branch; and
- Denise Phillips, Head of FIU Operational Policy Branch

The Committee heard that the Department intends, under the negative resolution procedure, to replace the current Cross-Compliance arrangements with the new Farm Sustainability Standards and associated penalty regime from 1 January 2026.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that the Department has acted on lessons from the current scheme, that it recognises efforts made to make improvements and the regime will introduce a smoother, more proportionate escalation of penalties.

The Committee also heard that the aim is achieve compliance and training and support will be offered to change behaviours to prevent breaches, rather than focusing on punishment and that there will be a review of the scheme in 2028.

A Member expressed concern that there has been no further consultation. Officials responded that engagement with stakeholders has been ongoing and there are no outstanding areas of disagreement.

Some Members expressed concern regarding the imposition of the maximum penalty and a Member queried how many times the most severe penalty had been issued in the last five years.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider its support, or otherwise, for the SR when it has been laid.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting how many times the maximum penalty was issued within the last 5 years and to how many individual farmers; how many were repeated or escalated breaches; and how many repeat breaches would an individual farmer have carried out before the maximum penalty was issued.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

***The Department Officials left the meeting at 11:42am***

***The meeting was suspended at 11:42am***

***The meeting resumed at 11:55am***

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:55am***

**8. Dilapidation Bill - Departmental Oral Evidence Session**  
***This agenda item was recorded by Hansard***



The Committee noted it had received an introductory briefing on this Bill at its meeting on 19 June. The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Simon Webb, Bill Lead; and
- Mark Allison, Bill Team,

The Committee were given an overview of the main Clauses of the Bill; the possible Ministerial amendment to Clause 11; and an overview and progress of the draft Guidance.

A question and answer session then followed.

Concerns raised by Members included: the discretionary element of the powers, if the Department would have any oversight of how Councils would use the powers; Councils possible reluctance to act depending on its individual priorities and availability of resources; the lack of rural aspect in the Bill; and the lack of inter-departmental collaboration.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

***The Department Officials left the meeting at 12:38pm***

***Áine Murphy MLA left the meeting at 12:39pm***

***The Nature Friendly Farming Network representatives joined the meeting at 12:39pm***

## **9. Briefing from Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN)**

The following briefed the Committee:

- Mr Cormac Dolan, NFFN Northern Ireland Manager;
- Mr Chris Dobbs, Farmer; and
- Ms Helen Keys, Farmer

The Committee heard of the need for support from the Department for the growth of the horticulture industry in Northern Ireland to be done in a nature friendly way, and the need for the Farming With Nature Scheme to include payments for management of existing habitats to avoid a decline in biodiversity.

The Committee heard about the work undertaken at Mallon Farm, a Nature Friendly Farm in Cookstown and the economic opportunities that could be found if more fruit and vegetables were grown in Northern Ireland.

A short question and answer session followed as it was agreed that questions could be asked on the farm visit.

The Committee heard that issues facing small growers include lack of support to scale up in order to achieve profitability, logistical challenges and access to land for new entrants.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

## **10. Departmental Written Briefing – Update on Fisheries Management Plans**

The Committee noted that the briefing provided an update on the four Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) for which DAERA is either the sole or lead responsible authority and which are used to deliver sustainable and well-managed fisheries following the UK's exit from the European Union and the Common Fisheries Policy.

The Committee noted that work continues in finalising the pre-consultation drafts and the proposed launch dates are as follows:

- Northern Ireland Non-Quota Shellfish FMP - November 2025;
- Irish Sea Pelagic FMP - early January 2026;
- Irish Sea Demersal FMP - Late January 2026; and
- Northern Ireland Inter-tidal Hand-gathering of Shellfish FMP - early 2027.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

## **11. Correspondence**

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 23 September, from the Department regarding the Minister's Adoption of the Round 4 Industry Noise Action Plan on 19 September, which will now be published on the Department's website.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, dated 25 September, regarding Analysis of 2025-26 Outturn and Forecast Outturn providing the June, July and August positions

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the 45<sup>th</sup> Examiner of Statutory Rules report dated 29 September and noted the report does not contain SRs of relevance to the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 25 September, that the Committee have been copied into from an Individual to DAERA in relation to Regulatory Concerns Regarding Re-Gen Waste Facilities.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission E-Newsletter September 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

## **12. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee noted the draft Forward Work Programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to publish the Forward Work Programme.

## **13. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

#### **14. Date and Time of Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on Thursday 9 October at Room 21 in Parliament Buildings at 10.00am

***The meeting was adjourned at 1pm***

**Signature: .....**

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated .....**